



**Committee on  
Homeland Security Democrats  
Bennie G. Thompson, Ranking Member**

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**Statement of Congressman Bennie G. Thompson before the Subcommittee on  
Emergency Preparedness, Science, and Technology:  
“Ensuring Operability during Catastrophic Events”**

“In the past two months, Hurricanes Katrina, Rita and Wilma have devastated much of the Gulf Coast. I have spoken to local officials – mayors, firefighters, and police officers throughout the Gulf Coast – and have heard uniformly about inability to communicate between levels of government and first responder disciplines. While some progress has been made since the attacks on September 11, these hurricanes once again revealed severe problems in our public safety communications infrastructure.

“Many first responders still cannot talk with one another because their radios and communications networks are not compatible. In many cases, the lack of proper equipment or the lack of radio spectrum are the root causes of the problem. Congress must act quickly to address these issues. However, compounding the problem in catastrophic events is the partial or total destruction of the communications infrastructure.

“During Katrina, cell and radio towers, 9-11 call centers and call switching centers were all damaged as a result of wind and flooding and the subsequent loss of power. This was not an issue of interoperability, but of basic *operability* resulting from the damage.

“In the future, DHS and FEMA must not only increase its own communications capacity, but must give more assistance to local and state officials to get their capabilities back on line. As a former volunteer firefighter and local official, I know that the ability to communicate is essential in establishing command and control of an emergency.

“The Federal government has the ability, assets, and responsibility to help state and local governments achieve operability when their local infrastructure is overwhelmed. I look forward to hearing from the witnesses here today about how their agencies are looking at ways to coordinate with each other and adapt military and private sector communication technology for use in these catastrophic situations, and how these efforts will benefit local first responders.”

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